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SUBJECT: SOCIAL SECURITY WORKERS, UNION CONTEMPLATES  
CHANGING LABOR AFFLIATION AND POLITICAL PARTY ALLIANCE

1. SUMMARY: Mexico,s the National Union of Social Security Workers (SNTSS) is contemplating changing its labor affiliation and has already moved to chance its political party connections. The SNTSS is a member of the National Workers Union (UNT), Mexico,s second largest labor federation. The UNT claims to be independent in that it has no formal ties to any political party but in fact it is closely linked to the PRD, Mexico,s main opposition party in Congress. Following multiple press reports on the SNTSS, pondered change, its leader ultimately stated that a final decision on the matter would not be made until the union,s October 2009 national convention. Officially the SNTSS stated that it may leave the UNT because of disagreements with the federation over how to promote the interests of Mexico,s workers. However, it appears more likely that the SNTSS leadership grew tired of being part of a labor organization that it does not control and it is now clear that Mexico,s two main opposition political parties engaged in a bidding war to win the union,s support for the country,s July mid-term elections. With some 400,000 active members and another 150,000 retirees who still retain substantial union rights, the SNTSS is the second largest public service union in Mexico. The SNTSS describes itself as an &independent8 union free to operate in the best interests of its members. In practice it is run exactly like Mexico,s less progressive unions in that the leadership is not openly elected, the union resists all efforts to account for its use of public funds or membership dues and it shows surprisingly little interest in defending internationally recognized worker rights. END SUMMARY.

#### BACKGROUND ON THE PLAYERS

2. The National Union of Social Security Workers (SNTSS) is the labor organization that represents the public service employees who staff Mexico,s national health care system. With some 400,000 active members and another 150,000 retirees who still retain substantial union rights, the SNTSS is the second largest public service union in Mexico. The only public service union larger than the SNTSS is the National Teachers, Union (SNTE) which reportedly has approximately one million members. In the past, the SNTSS was one of the many unions in Mexico formally linked to the country,s former ruling party, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). When the PRI lost power in 2000 the SNTSS saw a considerable drop in its influence and began looking around for other options.

3. The option it chose was to join the National Workers

Union (UNT). The UNT is a federation of unions who are officially independent in that they have no formal ties to any political party. In reality the UNT is closely linked to what is now Mexico's main opposition party; the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD). When the SNTSS joined the UNT the size of its membership catapulted the organization into the position of being the second largest labor federation in Mexico. Despite joining the UNT the SNTSS initially maintained its official links to the PRI. However, in the run up to Mexico's 2006 presidential elections the SNTSS broke with the PRI and effectively joined its fellow UNT unions in supporting the PRD.

¶4. The main incentive for the SNTSS, break with the PRI was an offer from the PRD of several choice spots on its list of proportionally elected Federal Deputies. Proportionally elected officials are persons nominated by a political party to hold elected office without having to subject themselves to the possibility of defeat in an electoral campaign. As it turns out the PRD's candidate lost the 2006 presidential election and the party ultimately reneged on its promise to place several SNTSS members in the national legislature as Federal Deputies.

#### RUMORS THAT SNTSS IS CHANGING SIDES

¶5. In late 2008 rumors began circulating in Mexican labor circles that the SNTSS was contemplating changing its labor and political party affiliation. According to the rumors the SNTSS was considering leaving the UNT and severing its unofficial but nevertheless very real links to the PRD. By

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February 2009 multiple press reports were describing SNTSS, contemplated changes as a done deal. Ultimately, however, the SNTSS's Secretary General, Valdemar Gutierrez Fragoso, declared that a final decision on the matter would not be made until the union's October 2009 national convention. According to Gutierrez the SNTSS, national leadership was not pressing for a withdrawal from the UNT. It was, he said, only responding to the wishes of the union's membership to explore better ways to promote their interests.

¶6. Continuing on, Gutierrez stated that the SNTSS membership believed it might be best for the union to leave the UNT because of disagreements with the federation over how to best promote the interests of Mexico's workers. Gutierrez averred that at one time the UNT was a unified organization dedicated to promoting the interests of the workers. Now the UNT has lost its focus and as each day passed the federation's associate unions were more interested in working for their individual benefits than they were in advocating on behalf of all workers. It was this lack of focus and loss of unity in promoting the welfare of ordinary workers, Gutierrez stated, that was prompting the SNTSS, members to contemplate leaving the UNT.

#### WORKER RIGHTS OR UNION LEADERS, POLITICAL GAINS

¶7. Secretary General Gutierrez, expressions of concern for the workers notwithstanding, both his past behavior and that of the SNTSS leadership, call into question the sincerity of their declarations. Rather than moving to leave the UNT because of concern over a lack of focus in defending worker interests it appears more likely that the SNTSS leadership simply tired of being part of a labor federation that it does not control. Moreover, it now clear that Mexico's two main opposition political parties, the PRD and the PRI, engaged in a bidding war to win the union's support for the country's July mid-term elections.

¶8. The SNTSS describes itself as an &independent8 union free to operate in the best interests of its members. In practice however, the SNTSS is anything but a shining example

of a free and democratic union. As a part of the UNT the SNTSS enthusiastically joined in public criticisms of the discredited and often corrupt practices of some of Mexico's less progressive unions. At the same time the SNTSS, own actions steadily reinforced its own reputation as a labor organization whose leadership gained power through rigged elections, as a union that resists all efforts to account for its use of public funds or membership dues and one that has shown surprisingly little interest in defending internationally recognized worker rights.

¶9. In responding to media inquiries about the SNTSS's possible departure from the UNT, Secretary General Gutierrez has repeatedly stated that the union made a mistake in severing its ties with the PRI in favor of the PRD. He openly confirmed that in recent months the SNTSS had held talks with both the PRI and the PRD that essentially bargained the union's support for this year's mid-term elections in July. The union leader also acknowledged that the former had made the SNTSS a better offer than the latter.

¶11. According to Gutierrez, the PRI not only offered to name at least two high level SNTSS officials as Federal Deputies, it also promised to open its ranks so that union members at the state level could compete internally within the party for nominations as candidates for positions as mayors, city council members and state legislators. For its part the PRD offered the SNTSS the possibility of competing in its internal processes for electoral offices in Mexico City's legislative body, a PRD stronghold. Unfortunately for the PRD, the degree of support offered and the number of potential spots being made available to the SNTSS could not compare with what the PRI was prepared to offer the union nationally.

#### COMMENT

¶12. On paper the SNTSS is still a part of the UNT but its ties to that labor federation are fairly tenuous. Because of

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this tentative loss of the SNTSS the UNT has now effectively fallen into third place among Mexico's national level labor federations. Mexico's largest labor federation is, and has always been, the PRI affiliated CTM (Confederation of Mexican Workers). The UNT's tentative fall to third place among national labor organizations automatically elevates the PRI affiliated CROC (Revolutionary Confederation of Workers and Peasants) from the number three spot that it has occupied almost since the UNT was formed. With the SNTSS, return to the PRI fold it can now argue that it is better positioned to represent the interests of Mexican workers than any other national political party. Ironically, a case can be made that the PRD and the unions affiliated with it are more likely to promote internationally recognized worker rights than the PRI or its affiliated unions. The PRI has rarely taken a strong stand on worker rights as that term is defined internationally. Traditionally the PRI has been much more concerned with helping unions operate with as little adaptation to changing times as possible. For its part the PRD has not always been willing to force its affiliated unions to live up to their progressive rhetoric on worker rights but at least it does recognize that doing things the way they have always been done is not in the best interests of Mexican workers.

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